

8 Many Modernities and Utopia: From Thomas More to South Asian Utopian Writings

Numerosas modernidades y Utopía: de Tomás Moro a los textos utópicos surasiáticos

Barnita Bagchi

Abstract

This chapter sees Utopia as at once a place of dreams, a place of the good, and a place which is nowhere to be found: paradox, ambiguity, and *janus-facedness* are embedded in a very modern punning coupling of the good, 'eu', and the nonexistent, 'ou', made by Thomas More in his Greek neologism 'utopia', title of his eponymous book, which was written in Latin (1516). Moored and yet in recent years unmoored from its Eurocentric roots, *utopia* has become more than a word or a culture-specific term. I argue that the word *utopia* was coined at a formative moment of European modernity, that the utopian mode crosses cultures, and after a consideration of More's *Utopia* then discuss in comparative perspective some keywords in the utopian mode from South Asia, especially India, written in the colonial period, in the 19th and 20th centuries. How do we recognize a utopia in a non-European context: must it have that strong element of irony that we find in More's foundational work? Is utopia always part of a secularizing impulse, or does religious imagination deserve a major place in our understanding of it? How do we make taxonomical distinctions between pieces of prose fiction that we term utopian, and the many real-life utopian communities that have flourished globally? Is there, that is, a distinction to be made between fictional, ironic imagination in literary texts, and more grounded utopian socio-political movements? In this chapter, I analyze certain strands in utopian thought and writing from South Asia (a region comprising sovereign countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka), mainly India, and see how answers may be given. My emphasis is on texts both fictional and non-fictional, and I take the literary aspects of those texts as important.

Keywords: colonial, India, multiple modernities, South Asia, Thomas More, utopia.

Resumen

Este capítulo considera simultáneamente a utopía como un lugar de sueños, un lugar de lo bueno, que no se encuentra en ningún sitio: paradojas, ambigüedades y duplicidades que se encuentran inmersas en un juego moderno de palabras que une lo bueno, "eu", y lo no existente, "ou", propuesto por Tomás Moro en su neologismo griego "utopía", título de su libro epónimo escrito en latín (1516). Desligado en años recientes de sus raíces eurocéntricas, utopía se ha convertido en algo más que una palabra o un término de una cultura específica. Afirmo que la palabra utopía fue acuñada en un momento de formación de la modernidad europea y que la modalidad utópica es transcultural. Además, después de abordar *Utopía* de Moro, discuto desde una perspectiva comparativa algunos trabajos clave en la modalidad utópica de Asia del Sur, especialmente de India, escritos en el periodo colonial, en los siglos XIX y XX. Cómo reconocemos una utopía en un contexto no europeo: ¿debe tener el fuerte elemento de ironía que encontramos en la obra fundacional de Moro? ¿Una utopía es siempre parte de un impulso secularizante o merece la imaginación religiosa un lugar mayor en nuestro entendimiento de ella misma? ¿Cómo distinguimos taxonómicamente entre piezas de ficción que llamamos utopías y las numerosas comunidades utópicas de la vida real que han florecido globalmente? Es decir, ¿hay que distinguir entre movimientos ficcionales, la imaginación irónica en los textos y los movimientos sociopolíticos utópicos cercanos a la realidad? En este capítulo, analizo algunos aspectos del pensamiento y escritura utópicos de Asia del Sur (una región que comprende países soberanos como India, Pakistán, Bangladés, Bután, Nepal y Sri Lanka), especialmente de India, e identifico posibles respuestas a estas cuestiones. Hago énfasis en textos de ficción y no ficción, y considero importantes sus aspectos literarios.

Palabras clave: colonial, India, múltiples modernidades, Asia del Sur, Tomás Moro, Utopía.



Perfil del autor / Authors' profile

Barnita Bagchi

Faculty member, Comparative Literature Section, Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication, Utrecht University, Netherlands. Ph.D., University of Cambridge, United Kingdom.

E-mail: barnita@gmail.com

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Introduction

This chapter sees Utopia as at once a place of dreams, a place of the good, and a place which is nowhere to be found: paradox, ambiguity, and *janus-facedness* are embedded in a very modern punning coupling of the good, ‘eu’, and the nonexistent, ‘ou’, made by Thomas More in his Greek neologism ‘utopia’, title of his eponymous book, which was written in Latin (1516). In recent years valuably unmoored from its Eurocentric roots, *utopia* has become more than a word or a culture-specific term (Dutton, 2010). I argue that the word *utopia* was coined at a formative moment of European modernity, that the utopian mode crosses cultures, and after a consideration of More’s *Utopia* then discuss in comparative perspective some key works in the utopian mode from South Asia, especially India, written in the colonial period, in the 19th and 20th centuries.

More’s *Utopia* is an intellectually playful work, deliberately playing with truth-telling status; using fantasy and fiction to make strong socio-economic, political, and ethical critique; engaging in multiple debates; calling its traveller to the island of utopia Hythlodæus, which can mean ‘dispenser of nonsense’; creating multiple refracting mirrors of contemporary Britain; and debating the virtues of Plato, that great ur-utopian writer of *The Republic*, versus the more pragmatic Aristotle. In *Utopia*, More already allows us, on the one hand, to take the possibility of social experimentation and reforming society seriously, and, on the other hand, he argues that these possibilities should be seen as a field of ethical and intellectual debate, where the poise between fact and fiction is generatively precarious. In this sense, I would argue, More allows us a sophisticated and ironic way into capturing literary and social experimentation together: in his own life, as we well know, his ambition, faith, and agonizing over the ethical public role of the would-be counsellor of princes (a charged debate in *Utopia*) led to his eventual conscientious objection to King Henry VIII, and More’s subsequent execution.

More titled his 1516 work *Utopia*. That punning oscillation in the word utopia between the good and the impossible is key to understanding the utopian mode as ludic, open-ended, and oscillatory between hope and fictionality. The life of the writer of *Utopia* enshrines many of the ambitions and contradictions of modernity in early sixteenth-century Europe. Thomas More was the son of Sir John More, a prominent judge. Thomas studied at St Anthony’s School in London, then at Oxford under Linacre and Grocyn, leading Humanists of the day. He was a Renaissance Humanist, participating with enthusiasm in expanding scholarship

round Greek and Latin writing, and placing humanity at the centre of scholarship and philosophy. More became a close friend of the Dutch Humanist and scholar Desiderius Erasmus during the latter's first visit to England in 1499. They enjoyed a lifelong friendship and correspondence. On Erasmus' third visit to England, in 1509, he wrote *Encomium Moriae*, or *In Praise of Folly*, dedicating it to More. Both *Utopia* and *In Praise of Folly* are Humanist critiques of social and moral corruption and evils. Both have a reforming impulse. Both have many ways of hedging and riddling: e.g. the framing narrative, the overlap between play and truth. Both are influenced by the satire, wit, and humour of the Greek writer Lucian, whose works More and Erasmus translated.

More became a lawyer, but was torn between a monastic calling and a life of civil service. While at Lincoln's Inn, he determined to become a monk and subjected himself to the discipline of the Carthusians, living at a nearby monastery and taking part of the monastic life. The prayer, fasting, and penance habits stayed with him for the rest of his life. Deciding to serve his country in the field of politics, he entered Parliament in 1504. He also married for the first time in 1504 or 1505. More attracted the attention of King Henry VIII. In 1515 he accompanied a delegation to Flanders to help clear disputes about the wool trade. *Utopia* opens with a reference to this delegation. In 1518 he became a member of the Privy Council, and was knighted in 1521. More refused to endorse King Henry VIII's plan to divorce Katherine of Aragón in 1527. Despite this, after the fall of Thomas Wolsey in 1529, More became Lord Chancellor, the first layman yet to hold the post. He resigned in 1532, citing ill health, but the reason was probably his disapproval of Henry's stance toward the church.

In 1534, More was accused of complicity with Elizabeth Barton, the nun of Kent who opposed Henry's break with Rome. In April 1534, More refused to swear to the Act of Succession and the Oath of Supremacy, new doctrines for the new Church of England, the Protestant official church of England, to this day headed by the king or queen. More was sent to the Tower of London on April 17. He was found guilty of treason. He was then beheaded on July 6, 1535. More's final words on the scaffold were: "The King's good servant, but God's First" (More, 2016). He was canonized by the Catholic Church as a saint by Pope Pius XI in 1935. His life encompasses the tension between worldly and courtly ambition and principle that is focused on and debated in Book I of *Utopia*.

More's *Utopia* was written in Latin. It has two parts, of which the second, describing the place, was probably written towards the close of 1515; the first

part, introductory, was probably written early in 1516. *Utopia* was first printed in Leuven, late in 1516, under the editorship of Erasmus, Peter Giles, and others among More's friends in Flanders. It was then revised by More, and printed by Frobenius at Basle in November, 1518. It was reprinted at Paris and Vienna, but was not printed in England during More's lifetime. Its first publication in England was in an English translation, made in Edward VI's reign, in 1551, by Ralph Robinson. *Utopia* is, then, a notably transnational work, cutting across nations, and written in Latin, understood across European societies.

In the founding text of the modern utopian tradition, the travel narrative that frames the description of the land of Utopia places that imaginary society in an 'elsewhere' of the present, carefully tied in to the real-life voyages of Amerigo Vespucci. That More comes at a founding moment of modernity is evidenced by his contextualizing the voyage to the island of Utopia by Hythlodæus in highly significant trips by European explorers to the so-called New World, trips that would lead to trade and to colonialism and imperialism by European powers such as Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. The 'elsewhere' found in More's *Utopia* is nonetheless taken beyond the real-life lands encountered by Vespucci, as the travellers journey on past the equatorial no-man's-lands into a new set of civilizations, distorting mirrors of those which are familiar to them. So the 'discovery' of the island of Utopia by Europeans is given a real-life context, but More is careful to distinguish it from just dry fact. The journey is also, however, distinguished from the more arrantly fictional travellers' lore. Hythlodæus the world-traveller tells More, on a diplomatic mission to Bruges, of Utopia: and Hythlodæus means 'dispenser of nonsense'. How seriously then do we take the book? Play and speculation are far more central to *Utopia* than is usually recognised.

More's *Utopia*: Ethics, Play, and Seriousness

Men live intergenerationally in the same household on the island of Utopia. Excess utopians go to the neighbouring continent, and form colonies, using land that is remaining unused in those countries. If original inhabitants resist the colonizers, the utopians will fight to maintain their colony. Here too *Utopia* is a recognizably early *modern* European text, singing a paean of 'ethical' colonialism, as the colonizing powers would themselves do repeatedly over the period 1500-1950. The

society on the island of Utopia is hierarchical, but diversity in religion is prized, and monotheism valued, while religious zeal is unacceptable. Here, again, in this prizing of religious diversity, we see how *Utopia* is a text of European modernity: the gradual granting of room and space to religious diversity was a hallmark thereof. Utopia benefits from its treasures and reserves of money, and its tactics and strategies deployed in foreign relations. Thus, this society of Utopia enshrines many of the key tensions of European modernity –times of real and widely-felt transition to newer modes of being and thinking– from colonialism to the idea of unavoidable war to the value of religious diversity. And ironizing it all, the More-persona undercuts Raphael's positive views on Utopia as a property-less, moneyless country at the very end. We are in *Utopia* constantly made to hold in our mind contraries, each of which it obliquely weighs against the other, notably through the use of the figure of speech litotes, through expressions such as 'not unwise', 'not the worst', of which there are over 140 examples in the first 100 pages of the Latin text (McCutcheon, 1971).

Multiple Modernities

More thus clearly uses fiction to open up a riddling, multiple set of questions about society, with some possible answers, and makes us think of relative frames of reference provided by different cultures coming into contact. It is now widely recognized that utopia as an imaginative mode has been present across temporalities and cultures, and is not to be viewed in Eurocentric terms. I have argued when discussing More's *Utopia* that utopia emerges in times of modernity, but that we need to take into account many or multiple modernities.

The idea of multiple modernities presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world, indeed to explain the history of modernity, is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs. These ongoing reconstructions of multiple institutional and ideological patterns are carried forward by specific social actors in close connection with social, political, and intellectual activists, and also by social movements pursuing different programs of modernity, holding very different views on what makes societies modern. Through the engagement of these actors with broader sectors of their respective societies, unique expressions of modernity are realized. (Eisenstadt, 2000, p. 2)

The monolithic view of modernity needs to be critiqued, and ‘cultures’ need to be seen as dynamic and complex complexes. It is untenable to think that ‘the West’ created or innovated modernity, and that the rest of the world somehow, derivatively and passively, received this (Thomassen, 2012).

More’s *Utopia*, which espouses a certain kind of Christian communism, and is also critical of the cruel treatment of thieves, of the enclosure of common lands to pauperize peasants, and of the profit motive, most certainly also contains a critique of incipient capitalism, while it is also indelibly embedded in the nexus of travel, ‘discovery’, trade, and incipient colonization that were all so much features of sixteenth-century Europe. While embedded in a key period of emerging modernity, it is also critical of many aspects of that modernity.

What happens when we analyze texts that are part of the utopian mode from outside Europe? Inserted as they are in this world of multiple modernities, must non-European utopias have a strong element of irony that we find in More’s foundational work? Is utopia always part of a secularizing impulse, or does religious imagination deserve a major place in our understanding of it, in other modernities such as the South Asian (remembering how important the divine and theism remain in More’s work)? In this chapter, I analyze certain strands in utopian thought and writing from South Asia, mainly India, and see how answers may be given. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Maldives, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka: the sovereign Nation-States of present-day South Asia encompass huge diversities but are nonetheless part of a region with common histories, including one of common reshaping by British colonialism; further, the majority of the population of this region lives in villages even today; also, religion continues to be highly important in society. My emphasis in this chapter is on texts both fictional and non-fictional, as well as on actual utopian social experiments led by some of these writers.

Women Writers and Actors in the Utopian Mode from Colonial South Asia

The contours of an ethical life seen as having happiness as its goal are sketched in More’s work. His work allows unusual forms of empowerment to women, such as allowing certain women to become priests. In my analysis of utopian writers from South Asia, my first set of discussions will deliberately focus on women writers and

actors in the civic sphere, such as Ramabai Sarasvati, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and Kashibai Kanitkar, all from the 19th and early 20th centuries. I use the first names of the women writers in this chapter, following the usual convention used in writing in India. Ramabai, an unusual feminist and converted Christian, ran a number of communities for child widows, destitute adult women, the disabled, prostitutes, and other marginalized groupings, in western India, and she also wrote about her activities. Hers were little female utopia, energized by a leader who broke the barriers of upper-caste Hindu widowhood. Rokeya S. Hossain ran pioneering institutions such as schools for Muslim girls in eastern India, and also wrote both fiction and non-fiction which argued that the oppression of women cut across religions and races. Kashibai, a pioneering novelist from western India, wrote a memorable feminist utopia. South Asia as a space of multiple religions and languages, participating in charged transnational and transcultural encounters in all periods of history but especially in the British colonial period, will be shown to innovate forms of feminist utopian writing and practice that deserve far more recognition than received.

Ramabai Sarasvati (1858-1922) was one of a number of pioneering Marathi reformist women, women from the western part of India, in what is the present-day province of Maharashtra in India, of which the capital is Mumbai. Others like Ramabai were Anandibai Joshee, Rakhmabai, Kashibai Kanitkar, Ramabai Ranade, Yashodabai Joshi, Laxmibai Tilak, Manorama (Ramabai's daughter), Baya Karve, and Parvatibai Athavale. Most of these women were born between 1858 and 1870, and were important figures in the social reform movement in late 19th century and early 20th century India. The debate about social versus political reform (and indeed the viability of these two being posed in mutual antagonism) emerged and crystallized by the 1880s in South Asia. Gender and the 'condition of Indian woman' became the crux of the issue. Those working for greater equality and equity between men and women in colonial India found that while the British colonial State used the notion of the so-called degraded condition of Indian womanhood to criticize Indians particularly when they demanded greater political liberty, the revivalist, neo-patriarchal Indian nationalists felt hostile to movements for greater female agency and autonomy.

Ramabai acted as a strong leader and founder of multiple institutions that she managed and for which she raised funds, and which worked for the education and welfare of women. Beginning with an earlier, more limited upper-caste target group (the Brahmin child widows educated at Sharada Sadan, the 'Hall of Learning'

that she first founded), the work eventually focused upon a lower-caste, grossly impoverished group of men and women (in Mukti Sadan, or 'Freedom Hall'). Corresponding with this, the educational program expanded; blind students were taught Braille, and the inhabitants of the missions were taught a very wide range of crafts and trades, including farming, dairy farming, tailoring, nursing, teaching, embroidery, laundering, gardening, down to operating a printing press. It was in this printing press that girls trained by Ramabai produced her posthumously published translation of the Bible, which she made from Greek and Hebrew into Marathi.

Ramabai's work was partly sustained by foreign supporters, mainly Christian women in the United States and Australia. She made Sharada Sadan, that first widows' home she founded, non-denominational, even though she was a converted Christian by that time. Hindu, primarily Brahmin reformers, supported and helped superintend this institution, until a hiatus developed between them and Ramabai: the Hindu reformers charged Ramabai with proselytizing the widows, leading to a break and administrative restructuring. The reasons for Ramabai's break with the Brahmin reformers has been analyzed most sympathetically by Uma Chakravarti whose grounded understanding has highlighted Ramabai's dual position of dissent against caste oppression and the oppression of widows (Chakravarti, 1998). The contention about Ramabai's alleged proselytization broke in 1891, during a period when influential upper-caste Hindu reformers were seeking to align women with a mythical world of tradition, privacy, and spirituality, making the influence of a feminist upper-caste woman turned Christian on Brahmin widows especially threatening. Ramabai stuck to her guns when faced with the wrath of the Hindu Brahminical (upper-caste) nationalists. When famine and plague broke out in Gujarat and the Central Provinces in 1896, she moved to a plot of land she owned in the village of Kedgaon near Pune, and here for the first time she started working with primarily lower-caste women, particularly famine victims. Mukti Sadan, a Christian institution, was opened here, along with Kripa Sadan ('Hall of Mercy'), which housed sexually victimized women, blind women, and aged women. An impressed Christian visitor commented that "all the tasks in this female kingdom, from beginning to end, are performed by women" (*Dnyanodaya*, 1907, November 28, p. 380, quoted in Kosambi, 2003, p. 30).

Ramabai, I would argue, was a utopian actor whose female utopian communities critiqued Hindu upper-caste oppression of women. She was Christian in an evangelical, vernacularized idiom in her mature years, and showed through

her writing and action how women could break out of socio-religious shackles and live in a cooperative world full of busy, active women holding down many occupations and sustaining a veritable female kingdom—all this in colonial India. The answer to the question of whether utopian action and writing are always or necessarily secularizing is in the negative, if we examine Ramabai's work. As regards irony, Ramabai did write with trenchant negative critique, even satire, about practices oppressing women, especially Hindu upper-caste women. However, it is in her utopian communities and activism that one sees a constant movement and going beyond static horizons, self-critically, also a feature of irony. Ramabai's activist career is thus more full of a sense of utopia as an always-moving, never fully achieved set of goals, even while an array of creative and useful practices took concrete form from Ramabai's imaginative vision of an Indian-led, feminist, egalitarian Christian utopia. If we view Ramabai's writing and oeuvre, one can argue that no clear taxonomic distinction can be made between utopian social experimentation and utopian literary experimentation: both work in interaction, and both show open-ended, criticality towards existing social hierarchies, and a sense of continual process.

Kashibai Kanitkar (1861-1948) wrote a feminist utopian novella in the language Marathi, titled *Palkhicha Gonda* or *The Palanquin Tassel*, published in 1928, but written in the late 1890s. This collocates issues of gender, family, conjugality, parental relations, women's rights, education, and social reform. Centered round three siblings, one brother and two sisters, the story has Rewati, the older of two sisters, being given into an arranged marriage to a man of unsound mind who rules a princely State. Rewati's family is deceived into this marriage, which the groom's family needs since his State can only be ruled by a married man. Rewati's life is now ruined—or so it seems. One of the highlights of the story is the symbol of the 'palanquin tassel', which Rewati's mother invokes to describe the kind of rich family she dearly wants her daughter to marry into, one in which the women travelled in richly decorated or tasselled palanquins, in which the woman sat inside in purdah, while she was carried along by men. When the hollowness of Rewati's marriage is revealed, the tassel becomes a mockery of a symbol.

Rewati, however, in a sense turns her life around, making the palanquin tassel the name and emblem of her husband's kingdom, and of her renovated life, rife with sadness and contradictions though it remains. She has a supportive mother-in-law and older brother: two authority-figures in the patriarchal family system she inhabits. These two figures support Rewati when she emerges as the *de facto* ruler

of the State, which is possible as she is the legal consort of the mentally unsound male ruler, with whom she publicly appears and towards whom she behaves with care and devotion, though he cannot function in normal life. Rewati institutes several social reforms in the State that she now effectively rules over. This includes Shibika College, where women in non-functional marriages are educated. Offices, made hereditary, are passed on to both men and women. Women are given the right to fully exercise control over their *stridhan* (women's wealth is the literal translation) which a woman carried to her marital family from the natal one. A plan is introduced to install a consultative committee, consisting half of women and half of men, on the panchayat model (Gandhi would later popularize the term panchayat, an age-old way for villages to govern themselves through a local council). Brahmins are patronized and paid by the State, but discouraged from living off the other subjects.

Rewati's sister Manu or Manikarnika meanwhile remains unmarried: a resounding verdict on marriage, which is nonetheless deeply attenuated by Rewati's wifely devotion and constant public display of her husband as co-ruler. As this account reveals, *The Palanquin Tassel* is all the more fascinating for the many ways it parades its contradictions, limitations, and exclusions. We also find an evanescent and dreamlike quality in the novella, which is emphasized by the concluding plot device whereby Rewati, after a dream vision in which her grandfather appears before her, is enjoined to leave the princely State with her siblings and husband: the Hindu doctrine of karma is invoked here as elsewhere in the novel. Having 'paid' for her past life through her present tribulations and achievements, Rewati and her siblings set out on a spiritual voyage round the world, leaving the State she had ruled consecrated to the ideals and practices she had set out. This ending then is not a secular ending, but steeped in spirituality, and veering away from the concreteness of the reformist State Rewati has ruled. It is also ironic, as with many other utopian works in South Asia, in the way that the literary work detaches itself from and is skeptical in the end about the bulk of the argument about an ideal, reformist, utopian state. In this sense, the self-skeptical, self-critical, ironic strand in More's *Utopia* is present in Kanitkar's feminist utopia from India too.

Women's leadership and contribution in building up educational and welfarist associations with utopian overtones (working for a dream, aware of the impossibility of achieving it fully, enunciating the principles of hope and of desire) took on, in the hands of fictional women such as Rewati, and real-life women such as Ramabai, powerful anti-patriarchal, and anti-orthodox religion contours. The

arguments for female education and female emancipation they made in their writing and activism contested views of women as docile and submissive. Their utopian writing and activism need to be seen in an integrated way in our taxonomy of utopia, I have argued.

Ramabai argued in her American travelogue, published in 1889, that conservative, patriarchal forces sought, during the nineteenth century, to erase American women's contribution to the constructive furtherance of welfarist work (Kosambi, 2003; Bagchi, 2009). Women such as Ramabai also contested colonialism through their work and writing, in strategic ways: Ramabai's choice of the United States, for example, as her major source of support for her educational work in India allowed her to bypass British interference in her work, and created new international networks and resources. Thus South Asian women active in the utopian mode also had a transnational dimension to their work, whether they travelled abroad, as Ramabai did (in England and the United States), or whether they did not, but engaged in encounters with transnational ideas of women's emancipation, like Kashibai, or connecting the emancipation of lower castes in India with the emancipation of the slaves in the United States, as was done by Jotiba Phule, leader of Indian lower castes –who are often referred to as Dalits, literally meaning the oppressed ones. Jotiba was the husband of the female utopian actor we discuss next, Savitribai Phule.

Born in 1831, in Satara district of Maharashtra, Savitribai was married in 1840 to Jyotirao or Jotiba Phule. Educated from 1841 at the initiative of and partly by Jotiba, Savitribai in 1847 took teacher training from a 'Normal School', and on 1st January 1848 founded one of the first modern schools for girls in India at Bhide Wada, in Pune. In 1849 she and her husband left her in-laws' home, and in 1849-50, more schools were founded by them in Pune, Satara, and Ahmadnagar. Savitribai founded, in 1853, an institution 'Balhatya Pratibandhak Gruh' (Home to Prevent Infanticide) at Pune, to prevent infanticide by pregnant widows on whom childbirth had been forced, and targeting upper-caste or Brahmin widows in particular (she prevented one such woman from committing suicide and adopted her son) – just as Ramabai had opened a school and home for Brahmin child-widows. In this way the Christian Ramabai and the activist for lower-castes Savitribhai also showed how much upper-caste Hindu women suffered in their own 'elite' contexts at the hands of patriarchy. In 1855 Savitribai helped found a night school for farmers and labourers (for both females and males). She was an active member of Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth), founded

by Jotiba Phule 1873. She died in 1897 of the plague, because she was working intensively during the plague outbreak to keep patients alive –just as Ramabai too worked with victims of the same plague and famine.

Savitribai and Jotiba worked locally, but Jotiba too had a transnational perspective: he published in 1873 the book *Gulamgiri*. With its title ‘gulamgiri’ literally meaning slavery or servitude, this book asked lower caste Indians to take inspiration from the abolition of slavery in America and the American Civil War: Indian lower castes and black American slaves were in similar conditions of servitude, it was argued (Phule, 1873/ 1980). Further, in *Satsar* (The Essence of Truth), a journal which Phule published in 1885, of which two issues were published, Phule defended Ramabai (Deshpande, 2002, pp. 206-210). Jotiba defended Ramabai’s right to convert, and her right to get education herself and to ask for education, including Western and Sanskrit education, for all other women. For more on Savitribai and Jotiba Phule, readers may consult the work of R. Kshirasagara and the late Sharmila Rege (Kshirasagara 1994; Rege 2010).

Savitribai and Jotiba worked busily as activists, while also writing. They spoke up for the cause of people belonging to the lower castes and for equality between men and women. They were not notably fixated on religion, but their work and writing showed a continual sense of dynamism and a sense that utopia has to be worked towards, and that it was not anything static or dogmatic that they worked for.

Savitribai and Jotiba saw education as a key for utopian means, as did all the other women discussed in this article. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s Bengali novel *Padmarag*, first published in Bengali in 1924, thus a few years before Kashibai’s novel, also has female education at its heart. This novel posits a real-life reformist and welfarist female utopia set in the heart of Kolkata: that community is titled ‘Tarini Bhavan’, or Salvation Hall, and is led by the female figure of Tarini Sen, a figure as philanthropic and self-sacrificing as Kashibai’s heroine in *The Palanquin Tassel*. There is a similar emphasis on women being educated to earn their own living, and perhaps an even stronger stress on the range of miseries found in heterosexual married women’s lives, as an alternative to which the female refuge of Tarini Bhavan is created, with powerful affective bonds among its inmates. Rokeya wrote with trenchant, biting satire and irony (see Quayum, 2013, pp. 1-17), and was haunted by a sense of pain, incompleteness, and plangency, a sense that building feminist utopia was a constant endeavor in process (see the introduction by Bagchi in Hossain, 2005, pp. vii-xxiv). The present writer has written, indeed, in great

detail about Rokeya Hossain's feminist utopian fiction and activism elsewhere, and readers may if they wish consult those works (Hossain 2005; Bagchi, 2009).

Rabindranath Tagore, Creativity, and the Utopian Community of Santiniketan: The World in a Single Nest

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Nobel Prize-winning creative writer and educator from Bengal in eastern South Asia, and M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948), arguably not just a politician but also a powerful philosopher for whom the renovated South Asian village was the key to regeneration and reform, were also powerful utopian thinkers. Tagore builds bridges between thought and emotion, builds a grounded, creative utopian community at Santiniketan in rural Bengal, and feels that writing, creative thinking, and constructive and creative work are often more effective than 'direct' political action. No wonder education, that crucial *bridger* of the private and the public, is also important in his work, and important to understand him as utopian thinker. Tagore also wrote with much irony all his life, not least when critiquing hierarchical, parrot-like, dystopian education, as for example in his ironic fable "The Parrot's Tale" (Tagore's English translation, titled "The Parrot's Training", was published in 1918).

The King called the nephew and asked, "Dear nephew, what is this that I hear?"

The nephew said, "Your Majesty, the bird's education is now complete."

The King asked, "Does it still jump?"

The nephew said, "God forbid."

"Does it still fly?"

"No."

"Does it sing any more?"

"No."

"Does it scream if it doesn't get food?"

"No."

The King said, "Bring the bird in. I would like to see it."

The bird was brought in. With it came the administrator, the guards, the horsemen. The King felt the bird. It didn't open its

mouth and didn't utter a word. Only the pages of books, stuffed inside its stomach, raised a ruffling sound.

Outside, where the gentle south wind and the blossoming woods were heralding spring, the young green leaves filled the sky with a deep and heavy sigh. (Tagore, 1918/2004, n.p.)

In contradistinction to this world of the stifling dictatorial court where birds and minds are killed in the name of education by starving the student-bird and filling it with paper, Tagore created a roomy, open utopian educational space in Santiniketan in rural Bengal in present-day India, where cultures of the world would connect and dialogue. Autonomy, freedom, and an investment in nature and greenery were integral to his thought. But Tagore also knew that his utopian community was a creative space, constantly in a state of change and process, and he wished to keep this sense of creative process alive in it. Rooted in the local, Tagore's utopianism critiqued narrow nationalism and aspired to create a cosmopolitan utopian space in Santiniketan.

Tagore, all his life, at one level, remained utterly committed to rural Bengal, today a transnational space straddling Bangladesh and India. A critique of the nation-state was central to Tagore's utopian vision. "A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose." (Tagore, 1917, n.p.) This is how Tagore defined the nation in *Nationalism*, and he was sharply critical of this mechanical, instrumental entity called the nation, idolatry of which led to nationalism, of which he was also severely critical. He associated the Nation-State with the West, and was horrified when countries such as Japan began aping the West in its strident nationalism, which then led to colonialism and imperialism. "When this organization of politics and commerce, whose other name is the Nation, becomes all-powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity" (Tagore, 1917). Tagore attacks British nationalism and imperialism, which governs India entirely as an abstract entity, without any reference to living sensibilities of the people of India.

One of the most outrageous elements of colonialism for Tagore was that the British nation deprived Indians of a fruitful, nourishing education. Since aggressive British nationalism and colonialism deprive the majority of South Asians of an enriching education, what can be done? On a micro-scale, Tagore created Visva-Bharati in Shantiniketan, where the world, 'visva', came to India. 'Yatra visvam

bhavatyekanidam' was the motto: where the world makes its home in a single nest. This was, I would argue, the enunciation of a transcultural, even cosmopolitan utopia –which would have education at its core. Tagore, who expressed time and again his belief in the need to reconcile East and West, and for the one to learn and take elements from the other, created an 'Eastern university,' for which he speaks eloquently in *Creative Unity* (1922b). The foundation of this is the belief that "the earth" is "one single country." (Tagore, 1922b, n.p.)

Tagore argues that in the ideal university,

[...] we can work together in a common pursuit of truth, share together our common heritage, and realize that artists in all parts of the world have created forms of beauty, scientists discovered secrets of the universe, philosophers solved the problems of existence, saints made the truth of the spiritual world organic in their own lives, not merely for some particular race to which they belonged, but for all mankind." (Tagore, 1922b, n.p.)

In the university, 'the exploiting utilitarian spirit' would not hold sway. Tagore,

[...] formed the nucleus of an International University in India, as one of the best means of promoting mutual understanding between the East and the West. This Institution, according to the plan I have in mind, will invite students from the West to study the different systems of Indian philosophy, literature, art and music in their proper environment, encouraging them to carry on research work in collaboration with the scholars already engaged in this task." (Tagore, 1922b, n.p.)

Tagore proclaims that Asia and India are in a period of renaissance and reawakening, and need to spread the learning of the East for the enlightenment of the world: "What is needed to complete this illumination is for the East to collect its own scattered lamps and offer them to the enlightenment of the world" (Tagore, 1922b, n.p.). Instead of the 'borrowed feathers' that he believed Indian universities of his time imparted to its students, he wishes to found a cosmopolitan university grounded in awareness of the riches of Asian and Indian civilization. The education imparted here would not be instrumental, but intrinsic; people would not learn in order to make material profits, but learn for the sake of learning, and then contribute in a meaningful way to the blossoming of societies and peoples. A truly synthetic, multivocal education would be imparted in this educational

utopia, which would also conform to Tagore's notion of Indian civilization as a truly multicultural civilization.

In his rural institutions in Santiniketan and Sriniketan (the place-names mean the abode of peace and the abode of prosperity respectively), Tagore created centers for the study of Chinese and Japanese, brought the art of batik from Indonesia and made it flower, taught English literature in open classrooms under trees, and presided over a surge of artistic creativity, fostered by artists such as Nandalal Bose. Women sang and danced in performances of a public nature, and key foreign associates such as Andrews, Elmhirst, Pearson, and Bake contributed to the freedom and creativity of Tagore's eastern university, his living, vibrant utopian community.

Tagore's utopia resonated across cultures, and brought him admirers and translators in surprising places. We will go into his influence in and interaction with southeast India, specifically the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia, to show how South Asian utopia travelled across cultures. Noto Soeroto (1888-1951), Indonesian writer, activist, and intellectual, translated Tagore's "The Parrot's Tale" into Dutch (n.d.), and published it from 's Gravenhage (The Hague), from his own publishing house Hadi Poestaka (the name is Sanskrit, means 'Ancient Book', and came from Soeroto's native Java, where Sanskrit cosmopolitanism was an integral part of the culture). The book carries Abanindranath Tagore's beautifully stylized illustrations, in Japanese-influenced style. Tagore's powerful parable of the 'education' of a parrot killed by confinement and by stuffing it with paper is translated and transmitted by a Dutch East Indies intellectual, who is experimenting with creativity and ideas about how his own country can regain autonomy. Such transmission is concrete testimony to Tagore's success in standing as a cosmopolitan utopian from a colonized country, simultaneously challenging imperialism and narrow nationalism.

Ki Hajar Dewantara (1889–1959), also from the Dutch East Indies, brought out a periodical named *Hindia Poetra*, Son of India, and showed interest in ancient Indian philosophy. He who would go on to become the first minister for education and culture in independent Indonesia, established his first Taman Siswa schools in Java in 1922 –Tagore and he were very much contemporaries in their foundation of educational institutions. Both so-called traditional Indonesian skills, including in music and dance, and so-called Western subjects were taught in these schools, of which the name seems to be a translation of 'Kindergarten'. These were also like Santiniketan Asian utopian experiments in education. Dewantara like Tagore developed an educational "style that could be considered progressive in international

terms as well as characteristically” local (Mcvey, 1967, p. 133). Dewantara first become acquainted with Tagore’s writings in 1913 through, for example, Noto Soeroto’s book *Rabindranath Tagores opvoedingsidealen* (n.d.).

On one among his many trips abroad, Tagore visited Indonesia in 1927. He visited Bali and Java. He received a warm welcome from the Taman Siswa school in Jogjakarta. Pictures of Tagore and Maria Montessori had hung in the audience hall at Taman Siswa well before Tagore’s visit. In 1932, in turn, Dewantara visited Tagore in Santiniketan. The relationship between Taman Siswa and Shantiniketan became close; students from Taman Siswa studied at Santiniketan, while guests and students from India visited Taman Siswa and other parts of Indonesia. Santiniketan hosted key Southeast Asian artists such as Bayi Aung Soe of Burma; and Affandi and Rusli of Indonesia. Rusli studied in India from 1932 to 1938; he went on to become a lecturer at the Indonesian Academy of Fine Arts and an award-winning artist. Another internationally-renowned Indonesian painter, Affandi, studied at Santiniketan and exhibited in India.

From India to the Dutch East Indies, modern Indonesia: Tagore’s South Asian utopianism, with a thrust on education, travelled fascinatingly to other Asian cultures, and created webs of mutual influence between these different Asian regions and countries. Those utopian educational ideals of Tagore included a greening of the learning area, an ascription of choice to children who loved climbing trees and settling down there with a book, a breakdown of the authority of the colonial drab formal classroom, and the equally drab rule and ruler-wielding clerkly teacher (Tagore, 1933)¹.

Tagore’s cosmopolitanism and ability to build and inspire educational utopia, meanwhile, went hand in hand with his *political* belief in creative activity as fruitful and positive; he was vehemently against asceticism and nihilism. Even his friend M.K. Gandhi’s ideal of *satyagraha*, civil disobedience, literally meaning ‘eagerness for truth’, underwent stern criticism in his hands. Tagore thought that power is an irrational force, and that even civil disobedience such as Gandhi’s could become an irrational power. He also disapproved of the movement to boycott Western education that Gandhi supported. At one very important level Tagore believed that the aesthetic or literary dimension is superior to a reductively political dimension. His utopia, fostered by education, is aesthetic. Tagore believed that all types of

1 For recent academic discussions which shed light on Tagore’s educational and creative experiments, readers may consult Bhattacharya (2013), Fraser (2015).

action, including political action, must have a dimension of play, beauty, freedom—dimensions which his utopia sought to nurture. Even the anti-colonial political movements he supported, always within limits, should not become rituals, fetishes, tyrannies, he believed. He nurtured these within his utopian community and his creative work, from writing to painting. He also remained a Romantic ironist, with his prizing of a constant process of becoming in human beings, with his scepticism about both nationalism and imperialism, and his sense of Santiniketan as a utopian community where play, which prizes changes and oscillations, flourishes.

Oceanic Circles: Gandhi's Village Utopia

The Gandhian utopia², meanwhile, as enshrined powerfully in Gandhi's article in the *Harijan* of 21st July 1946, is enunciated as based in the republican, self-sustaining village, with its own governance through the Panchayat (literally meaning rule of five), a centuries-old south Asian local unit of self-governance:

Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. It will be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without. Thus, ultimately, it is the individual who is the unit. This does not exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbors or from the world. It will be free and voluntary play of mutual forces. Such a society is necessarily highly cultured in which every man and woman knows what he or she wants and what is more, knows that no one should want anything that others cannot have with equal labour. (Gandhi & Brown, 2008, p. 158)

Gandhi's village utopia is envisaged as an oceanic circle, and he does not at all mind this metaphor and model being termed utopian:

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the

2 See Fox (1989) for a political and epistemological explication.

bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose center will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units.

Therefore, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle, but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it. I may be taunted with the retort that this is all Utopian and, therefore, not worth a single thought. If Euclid's point, though incapable of being drawn by human agency, has an imperishable value, my picture has its own for mankind to live. Let India live for this true picture, though never realizable in its completeness. We must have a proper picture of what we want before we can have something approaching it. If there ever is to be a republic of every village in India, then I claim verity for my picture in which the last is equal to the first or, in other words, no one is to be the first and none the last. (Gandhi & Brown, 2008, pp. 158-159)

Gandhi's utopian ideals were also eloquently articulated in an early work, *Hind Swaraj* (Gandhi & Parel, 1997), which was first published in Gujarati in the columns of the *Indian Opinion* of South Africa; it was written in 1908 during Gandhi's return voyage from London to South Africa. Gandhi argued here in detail that violence offered no remedy for India's ills, and that 'eagerness for truth' or *satyagraha* would be a better and superior weapon against the injustices of colonialism. The Gujarati work was then proscribed by the government of Bombay, and Gandhi then translated it into English. The book indicts modern civilization and asks that through non-violence, India should prepare itself for *Swaraj*, both self-rule for India, and the rule of the self over itself: *swa* means self, *raj* means rule (Vajpeyi, 2012). As we saw in Gandhi's description of the utopian oceanic circle of the village republic he dreamed of, he too saw incompleteness, process, and self-awareness of the impossibility of such a utopia being fully realizable as fundamental to his vision. Like Tagore, then, Gandhi may be seen as an ironist in the realm of utopia, seeing incompleteness and process at the heart of it. His utopian writing and utopian activism need to be seen in an integrated way on our taxonomy of South Asian utopia: the one cannot be divorced from the other.

Iqbal and Pan-Islamic Utopia

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), the most famous modern South Asian poet in Urdu and Persian, also belonging to the British colonial period, cannot be cast primarily as a nationalist thinker. Revered as national poet of Pakistan and as someone who stood up for the notion of a separate homeland for South Asian Muslims, he however believed in the notion of a pan-Muslim utopia, of a different kind to a Nation-State and to imperialism. He also played a major role in bringing South Asian Islam closer to its Arab connections, positing an Arabia-inflected South Asian utopia, and seeking to make its connections with Persian culture less strong (Harder, 2010). As such, inescapably, Iqbal points to a kind of espousal of a pan-Islamist utopia. That his poetry creates its own kinds of unique literary spaces to give form to such thoughts is also inescapable. The *Javed-Nama* (1932/1966) is a remarkable work by Iqbal in Persian in verse, and very helpful for understanding how his vision of utopia is expressed in and through his poetry. It was published in 1932, and is dedicated to and named after his son Javid/Javed. Iqbal's work has an epic quality, with Dante's *Divine Comedy* the clearest intertext, and Jalaluddin Rumi, the Persian poet, being the other clear influence. Indeed Iqbal had written to a friend that he intended to produce "a kind of Divine Comedy in the style of Rumi's *Matnawi*" (quoted by Schimmel, 1963, p. 53).

The *Javid-nama* takes us on the poet's traversal of cosmic spheres to the heavens, with the poet seeking to discover the secrets of life. His mentor, Rumi, is his guide, just as Virgil had guided Dante in *The Divine Comedy*. The poet-narrator has the name Zenda Rud, which means 'living stream.' From a journey to the moon, where the Hindu sage, Jahan-Dost (*Vishwamitra* in Sanskrit, 'Friend of the World') tells them that the East will triumph over the materialistic West; to a trip to the valley Yargmid, which contains the tablets of Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ, and Mohammad; to Mercury, where they discuss many political matters with Jamal-al-Din Afgani; to Venus, and an encounter with the arrogant British imperialist Lord Kitchener; to Mars, where Zenda Rud is unimpressed by a woman speaking up for women's liberation, including her prediction of women conceiving and reproducing by artificial insemination; to Saturn, where India appears as a beautiful *hour*i chained by slavery: Zenda Rud travels far indeed. At the very end, the voice of God reveals the secrets of life in a final poem, which I quote in part:

Abandon the East, be not spellbound by the West,
for all this ancient and new is not worth one barleycorn.
That signet-ring which you gambled away to Ahriman
should not be pledged even to trusty Gabriel.
Life, that ornament of society, is guardian of itself;
you who are of the caravan, travel alone, yet go with all!
You have come forth brighter than the all-illuminating sun;
so live, that you may irradiate every mote. (Iqbal, 1932/1966, n.p.)

Encompassing as it does different religions, political topics, and cultures, and expressing a transcultural vision of pan-Islamism going beyond narrow political groupings, using the mode of debate and dialogue and conversation as it does, *Javid-Nama* is a major modern utopian work in which both religion and transcultural conversations are central. It thus refutes any notion of all modern utopia being inherently secularizing.

Ambedkar and Dalit Utopia of the Here and Now

Religion also becomes reinvented in the Dalit utopia invoked by B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), through the Navayana form of Buddhism³. Dr Ambedkar, whose father was a friend of Jotiba Phule, spearheaded a movement of Dalits, and critiqued Gandhi's moderate espousal of the cause of the lower castes, Dalits, among Hindus. Ambedkar, highly educated, and possessing a PhD from Columbia University in New York, wanted caste to be seen as a central element in the constitution of Indian society, and he wanted its annihilation. After decades of inner reflection, he came to the conclusion that since Hinduism was for him ineradicably contaminated with upper-caste or Brahminical hegemony, he would convert to another religion. He considered both Sikhism and Buddhism, both religions that arose in reaction to upper-caste-dominated Hinduism, and eventually settled on Buddhism. His Buddhism is a utopia in the here and now. It rejects metaphysics, and focuses on ethics and mind-change. His Dalit utopia was thus a reinvented Buddhist utopia, shorn of ritualistic and metaphysical trappings. Ambedkar's book *The Buddha and*

3 For more on Ambedkar and the Dalit movement, readers may consult Zelliott (1992) and Mohanty (2004).

His Dhamma, published in 1957 after Ambedkar's death, spells out his radical, path breaking reinvention of Buddhism: this branch of Dalit Buddhism is now known as Navayana, or Renovation. Ambedkar's key points of difference with traditional Buddhism lay in his emphasis on Buddha's social conscience, his emphasis on man and man's relation to other men being the center of the Buddhist Dhamma or ethic; his belief that while souls may be reborn, they are also renewed out of parts of many other souls in each new birth; and his spelling out of the role of the monk or *bhikkhu* as a warrior and social activist in the social causes of the here-and-now. Ambedkar squarely rejects metaphysics, and sees Dalit utopia as conscience-based, egalitarian, action-oriented, and always in a process of becoming and change, with self-irony a fundamental constituent of the utopian vision.

Conclusion

South Asian utopian writings are innovative, and reconfigure our definitions of utopia. All the south Asian utopian writers and actors discussed here see their utopia as contingent and in a state of dynamic change, not working towards static goals. Irony is present particularly markedly in the utopian oeuvre of the literary figures, notably Kashibai Kanitkar and Rabindranath Tagore; however, irony, in the sense of Romantic irony, constantly taking a skeptical, *processual* stance towards the utopian writer-actor's own oeuvre, literary and activist, is present in all the figures I have examined.

With reference to South Asian women utopian writers and activists, many of whom are also educators, we see that the reinvention of tradition, use of transnational influences, and communities of utopian experimentation are all important markers. We also see that all the women utopian writers I have discussed retool and recreate religion in ways that enable inclusion of marginal social groupings, from lower-castes (Dalits) to upper-caste (Brahmin) widows condemned to suffering and austerity, to the disabled. All gendered subalterns, South Asian women utopian writer-actors combine local and transnational idioms and resources. It is striking how much these women were able actually to do: agency is strongly present in their utopian work. For the males examined in this article, too, religion remains important; this is especially true for Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Iqbal.

The article, while showing how diverse the utopian thought of Tagore, Gandhi, Iqbal, and Ambedkar (four toweringly iconic public figures from 20th-century

South Asia) is, also shows that each goes beyond parochial nationalism to find his own distinctive utopian vision, whether that is based in the ideal of a renovated village driven by *Satyagraha* (Gandhi) moving in oceanic circles; a utopian set of educational institutions enshrining cosmopolitan aesthetics and creativity (Tagore); a cosmic, pan-Islamic, utopian vision of the world (Iqbal); or the activist, socially conscientious Navayana Buddhist utopia of the here and now in which Dalits play a leading role (Ambedkar). South Asia, with its plethora of religions, its caste system in Hinduism, its long history of cultural contact with other civilizations, and its ability to combine at any one time elements that seem to be from different, incompatible time periods, to combine the 'archaic' and the 'contemporary', as it were, within its modernities, offers a distinctive set of trajectories for the utopian imagination and utopian action; in the especially hybridized world set in place after the onset of British colonialism, the figures discussed in this article offer their own utopias responding to the alternative modernities that they lived in and also helped to constitute.

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